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FIGHTING FAMINE IN NORTH KOREA

A team of American relief workers spends three months distributing food in a country that is suffering from long years of isolation

A WARMING TREND

Portland-based Mercy Corps International joined a relief effort to bring thousands of tons of food to North Korea, a nation long closed to outsiders.

In an apparent warming trend, the United States, China and the two Koreas said last week they would begin negotiating a peace treaty for the Korean Peninsula.

And high-level talks between North Korea and the United States were held Wednesday for the first time at the State Department in Washington, D.C.

North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan (above) met with U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary Charles Kartman to discuss missile proliferation, the opening of diplomatic offices in each other's capitals and U.S. servicemen still missing and presumed dead the Korean War.

U.S. aid worker finds hope amid the famine devastating N. Korea

By TOM EWERT
Mercy Corps International

I had many questions and unknown expectations when I agreed in August to join a team of U.S. relief experts monitoring the distribution of 55,000 metric tons of U.S. food aid in North Korea. We did not know how long we would stay, where we would be housed, what we would be able to see or how safe we would be.

Despite the questions of duration, housing, access and safety, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to participate in the first U.S. relief team allowed on the ground in the long-isolated country.

The team represented a consortium of nongovernmental organizations involved in sending humanitarian aid to North Korea. The team worked under the auspices of the United Nations World Food Program and included representatives of five consortium members: Amigos Internacionales; Catholic Relief Services; Care; World Vision International; and Mercy Corps International, based in the Portland area.

We arrived Aug. 15 in Pyongyang via Beijing. Our first assignment was to witness the offloading of the Judy Litrico, which brought 25,000 metric tons of corn, about 27,500 short tons. The Judy Litrico held enough corn to fill about 229 rail cars. (A rail car holds about 120 tons of corn.)

Half of the first shipment went to the World Food Program's efforts to feed children age 6 and younger through nurseries and kindergartens. The U.S. team planned to focus its distribution on key vulnerable groups not already reached: children 7 to 17 and the elderly.

But the day after we arrived in Pyongyang, Typhoon Winnie swept through the region and destroyed thousands of acres of arable land along North Korea's west coast. The typhoon was one more natural disaster in a litany of floods, droughts and

> *"They take you to the pharmacy, and the cupboards are empty except for a few rehydration packets. They'd say, 'We sent the patients home because there's no heating and there's no food.'"*
>
> **John Yale,** World Vision International

hailstorms that have devastated an already faltering economic system.

After assessing the damage and negotiating with the North Korean government, we decided to direct 6,800 tons of corn to a food-for-work program. That would be enough to fill about 73 rail cars.

This corn became the only food source for the hundreds of thousands of North Koreans laboring to repair the damaged embankments, dikes and irrigation canals.

Whole villages were mobilized, with men, women and children doing everything by hand, carrying dirt and packing it into place.

The weather was warm; men took off their shirts and rolled up their trousers as they waded through the mud. I could see how painfully thin everyone was. I could see them lining up for their small ration of corn, either cooked or roasted at the side of the field in huge kettles. I could see how critically important our food was in keeping these people going.

Distributing the food

We next turned our attention to ensuring that the rest of the corn was distributed to children and the elderly. Our daily activities included visiting provincial and county warehouses to witness the distribution of corn and talking with county officials, warehouse managers and other employees to verify that the amount of food allocated had arrived.

We counted the sacks of corn, bagged with the familiar red, white and blue handclasp of the USAID logo. We also talked with the women collecting their ration to learn more about how they were eating and coping.

They thanked us profusely for the U.S. contribution. They told us they gathered wild grasses, bark, roots and ground up corncobs to stretch meager food supplies. Each woman received a bag of grain containing a daily ration of 400 grams a day per child for 42 days, about two handfuls of corn a day.

"Would it last that long?" I asked the women. "Longer," they said as they bundled the corn into worn scarves and hoisted it onto their heads. They couldn't depend on any future distribution of food.

I also knew that in many cases, this ration would either feed the whole family or the parents and perhaps grandparents would forgo eating to ensure that the children could eat.

TUN MYATT/World Food Program

A boy admitted to the People's Hospital of Chongjin, North Korea, suffers from malnutrition and related diseases. Many hospitals are unheated, have no drugs and can offer little help to the starving populace. One hospital visited by U.S. relief workers in recent months had only a few rehydration packets to use to treat people. A future mission will train medical workers.

The Nippon Foundation via Associated Press

The Nippon Foundation via Associated Press

ABOVE: A man carries bowls of corn meal mixed with wild grass at the Chogli Cooperative Farm in Unpa, southeast of Pyongyang. Even in the cities, people forage for grasses and bark to help supplement their meager rations.

LEFT: Emaciated children can be found in care centers in many areas. Relief workers who returned from North Korea last week said they were given little hard data. "We were told there were deaths," said John Yale of World Vision International. "We were never able to get figures; that seemed to be a sensitive issue."

Working in North Korea was very different from any of my previous experiences in Bangladesh, Somalia, Pakistan and, most recently, Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, there were no mass movements of refugees or displaced people. But across the nation, the North Korean people have survived on reduced rations for several years, and hunger can be seen in every face.

Malnutrition and the diseases that come with it are rampant. A generation of Korean children has known only hunger. The children are stunted, plagued by diarrhea and might develop long-term disorders because of a lack of proper nutrition.

In some counties, we were told that no food had been publicly distributed since 1995. The officials said people were coping by securing food from various sources: international donations from nongovernmental groups, the World Food Program, the Red Cross and China; barter with China; and food gifts from relatives in China.

Many of North Korea's 12 provinces are rugged and mountainous. Some areas are difficult to reach with food aid because of fuel shortages and poor roads. But even in Pyongyang, you could see people foraging for bark or grass.

Another difference was our inability to travel freely in North Korea. We had to have permission and supervision from our guide and translators. Parts of the country were off limits to us, as they are to the entire international community. We simply do not know how bad the conditions are in those regions. But we fear that the North Koreans could be hiding the worst cases and the worst aspects of the food shortage in an effort to save face.

Our impression is that they want the international assistance but are embarrassed to admit the full extent of the crisis.

Driving through the countryside, I saw hints of the fuller story. I saw hills planted to the ridgelines as people tried to squeeze every bit of productivity from an exhausted agricultural system. I saw people harvesting rice by hand because they lacked fuel and tires for their tractors. I saw a 14-year-old girl who looked about 10 picking up individual grains of rice after the harvest.

I stopped to talk to her and learned that she had been in the field since dawn; it was afternoon. She had two pockets and a small rag filled with rice as she searched for enough to feed her family. Tired and dirty, she answered our questions nervously, afraid to be talking to foreigners.

Although we were primarily focused on monitoring food, we also witnessed the rapidly deteriorating condition of the medical situation. The hospitals are bare of medicines: They have no aspirin, no antibiotics, no anesthesia. Operating rooms consist of simple tables, overhead lights and a few boxes of instruments.

The sterilizing machines, as with most equipment, are antiques from the 1960s. There is no heat and no ambulances. We saw an oxcart transporting a patient to the hospital.

A sense of hope

But at the end of three months, I left North Korea with a sense of hope. Our team has laid the groundwork and an important foundation for future U.S. teams. We saw a significant improvement in our relations with North Korean officials since our arrival in August. We saw that humanitarian aid is reaching its intended targets and is saving lives.

But more food is needed in the pipeline if we are to continue to sustain these lives. For thousands, the only food they receive is through international channels.

The next project for the consortium is to monitor $5 million worth of medicines from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in response to a Unicef appeal. The team will monitor the distribution of these medicines in addition to training medical workers how to use them.

We are also hopeful that another team will monitor the next shipment of U.S. food aid in the spring and continue to expand our ability to more clearly understand the extent of the problem and how best to solve it.

Tom Ewart of Mercy Corps International spent three months with the team in North Korea. He went there directly from Kyrgyzstan and is currently vacationing with his family in Wichita, Kan.

THE FOOD

The nongovernmental organization team monitored the distribution of 55,000 metric tons of food, or 60,500 short tons. It was part of a larger U.S. donation of about 110,000 tons of corn, rice and corn-soya blend in response to the U.N. World Food Program appeal for international assistance.

The remaining 49,500 tons went to the World Food Program's efforts to feed children age 6 and younger. The food arrived in four shipments:

- **AUG. 23:** The Judy Litrico arrived in Nampo with 27,500 tons of food.
- **SEPT. 23:** The Overseas Marilyn arrived in Nampo with 26,400 tons.
- **OCT. 3:** The Overseas Harriet arrived in Chongjin with 26,400 tons.
- **OCT. 19:** The Arai arrived in Nampo with 30,800 tons: 14,300 of corn, 11,000 of rice and 5,500 of corn-soya blend.

THE TEAM

- **MEMBERS:** John La Noue, Amigos Internacionales; Mike Frank, team leader, Catholic Relief Services; Dan Roth, finance officer, Care; Tom Ewert, Mercy Corps International; John Yale, World Vision International
- **MISSION:** To monitor the distribution of corn, rice and corn-soya blend.
- **RECIPIENTS:** Children age 7 to 17, the elderly and a food-for-work program.
- **WHERE:** More than 100 counties in North Korea received and disbursed the food.
- **TRAVELS:** The team was allowed to travel to 10 of 12 North Korean provinces in its three-month assignment, a longer stay than any other U.S. relief team so far.

SIZE COMPARISONS

- A metric ton is about 2,205 pounds. A short ton is 2,000 pounds.
- A rail car can hold about 120 tons of corn. It would take about 504 rail cars to hold the 60,500 tons (55,000 metric tons) of food distributed by the team.
- That's about five full trains. Each would take about 20 minutes to clear a railroad crossing if it were traveling about 10 mph.

THE FAMINE

Officials reported a harvest of 2.68 million tons of rice and corn, far short of the 5 million tons the World Food Program estimates North Korea needs each year. The 1994 harvest, before the natural disasters, was reported at 6.8 million tons.

Although food is the most urgent need, John Yale of World Vision International, a relief agency based in Monrovia, Calif., said conversations with North Koreans disclosed serious shortages of almost everything needed to get the economy working again.

Rural homes were lit by kerosene lamps, and even in the capital, Pyongyang, streets were mostly dark at night because of an energy shortage.

"One thing that impressed me was being in a hospital where . . . they take you to the pharmacy, and the cupboards are empty except for a few rehydration packets," Yale said. "They'd say, 'We sent the patients home because there's no heating and there's no food.'"

HOW TO HELP

- **MERCY CORPS INTERNATIONAL:** Contributions may be sent to Mercy Corps International — North Korea Relief, P.O. Box 9, Portland, Ore. 97207. Or phone 800-292-3355, Ext. 223.
- **NORTHWEST MEDICAL TEAMS INTERNATIONAL:** Call 800-959-HEAL (800-959-4325). Checks should be sent to NWMTI-North Korea, P.O. Box 10, Portland, Ore. 97207-0010.

Northwest Medical Teams plans to send more teams of physicians to help train medical workers in North Korea. The last four-member team was there from Oct. 1 through 18. North Korean physicians appear to be working in 1940s and '50s conditions in hospitals, but the people insist on being treated only by North Korean doctors, team members noted.

Sources: Mercy Corps International; Port of Portland; wire services; The Oregonian files

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